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Immigrants in Canada who work in a language other than English or French

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by Derrick Thomas

Linguistic diversity has long been a feature of Canada's work force. English, French and Aboriginal languages have served and still serve as languages of commerce and work in various regions of the country. The linguistic mix has been enriched by immigrants from a large number of other countries.

Immigrants make up a growing share of Canada's population and labour force. There were over 3.8 million immigrants in the experienced labour force in the 2006 Census,[1] an increase of about half a million over the number in 2001. Increasingly, immigrants come from source countries where English and French are not commonly spoken. Consequently, a larger proportion of Canadian workers now use a language other than English or French in their job. For the purpose of this article, "official languages" refers to English and French.[2]

At the time of the 2006 Census, close to 831,000 people in Canada's labour force used a language other than English or French on a regular basis in their job. This constitutes close to 1 in 20 (4.5%) people who had been employed between January 1, 2005 and May 16, 2006. While still a small proportion nationally, it represents an increase both absolutely (86,900) and proportionately (from 4.41% to 4.54%) over the 2001 Census. Moreover, the proportion using a language other than English or French at work is much higher in some provinces and major cities than in other parts of the country.

In 2006, 611,400 of workers using non-official languages were immigrants. Over 70% of these immigrants were already Canadian citizens.

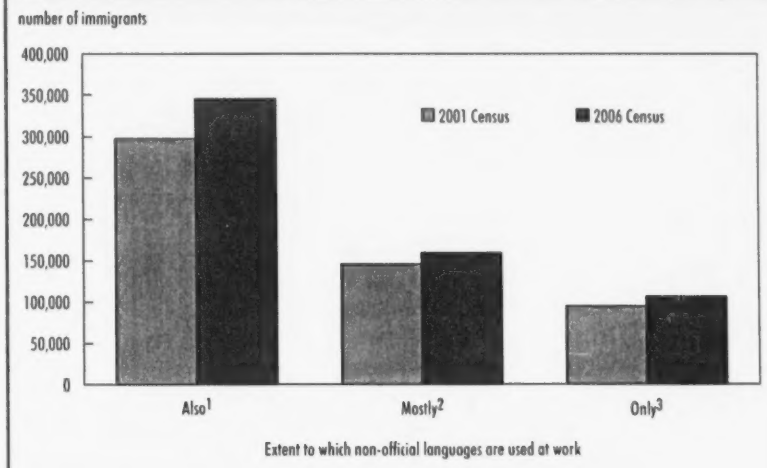
This article will use data collected in the 2001 and 2006 censuses of Canada to describe immigrants who used a language other than one of Canada's official languages in their work. It will explore the extent to which they rely on non-official languages at work in conjunction with: their official language ability, their age at immigration, their level of education and their place of work in Canada. It will look at which languages immigrants actually use in their jobs. The article also examines whether immigrants are more likely to use non-official languages at work within their language communities.

English and French remain the dominant languages in Canada's workplaces and markets. There are, however, establishments, networks, markets and neighbourhoods where workers can function and sometimes thrive in another language.[3] These linguistically-delimited communities or markets (sometimes referred to as enclaves[4]) depend on a concentration of people who share not only a language but often an ethnic background, common experience and similar tastes.

Some researchers report that workers in such communities face limited opportunities and are rewarded less well for their skills.[5] Ethnic community based economies, however, can provide opportunities for newcomers to earn a living despite the inability to communicate fluently in the dominant language. Owing to a concentration of consumers and workers, such communities can also more easily and cheaply produce and distribute goods and services valued uniquely by ethnic groups.[6] Businesses positioned to do so can avail themselves of both the skills and markets represented by immigrants in their community.

While different languages and cultures can disrupt the flow of information and exchanges between these communities and the wider marketplace, these barriers are not impermeable. Ethnic products frequently find a wider market, and enclave labour can be vital to the functioning of at least some sectors of the general economy.[7]

Chart 1 Immigrants who used a language other than English or French at work: 2001 and 2006 Census



1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2001 and 2006.

Non-official languages are becoming more prevalent in Canadian workplaces

Immigrants who work in Canada can be distinguished according to the extent to which they use non-official languages in their jobs. Jobs differ in the amount of communication they require, but the proportion of communication that takes place in a non-official language can be used to construct a scale. This scale can be used to study and compare immigrants who use a non-official language in their job at different censuses (Chart 1) and across other characteristics.

At one end of the scale are those immigrant workers who "only" use non-official languages; then, those who "mostly" use non-official languages but who also use an official language with some regularity; next are those who mostly use an official language but who "also" regularly use a non-official language; and on the other end are those who "do not" use a non-official language at work with any regularity.

Since the mid-1990s, more immigrants have been selected on labour market criteria that include official language skills. Thus a slightly larger share of Canada's immigrants is arriving with the ability to speak English or French.[8] The proportion of immigrants who work in a non-official language declined very slightly between 2001 and 2006 (16.3% vs 16.0%).[9] Nonetheless, according to 2006 Census data, immigrants are 10 times more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to work in a non-official language (16% versus 1.5%).

For the past 15 years, Canada has had historically high levels of immigration. As a consequence, immigrants make up an increasing proportion of the labour force. They accounted for more than one-third of labour force growth between 2001 and 2006 and now constitute over 20% of those who work in Canada. As a result, the total number and share of workers in Canada using a non-official language at work has increased.

The number of immigrants working in Canada in a non-official language grew from 538,000 in 2001 to 611,400 in 2006. This represents an increase of 73,400 people or almost 14%.

Most immigrants who use a language other than English or French at work use it in conjunction with one of these official languages (Chart 2). In fact, more than eight in ten (83%) use English or French regularly at work along with a non-official language. About one in six immigrants use a non-official language "only" (17%).

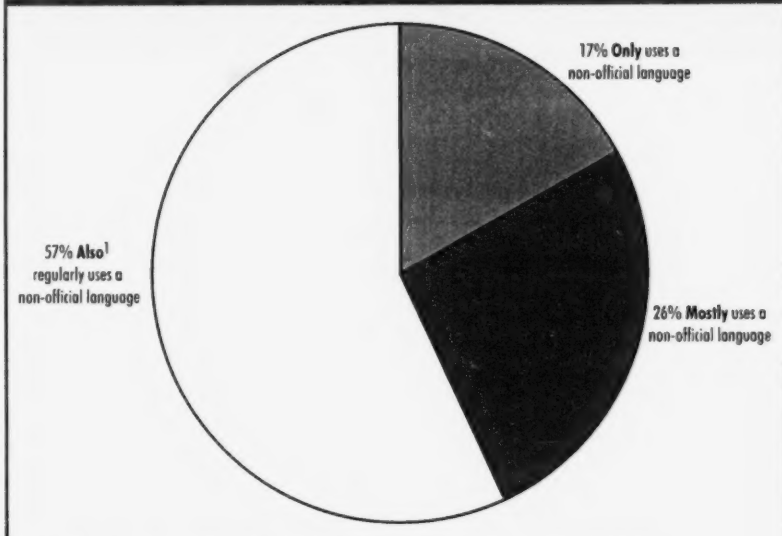
Asian languages predominate

Immigrants use a variety of non-official languages at work. East Asian and particularly Chinese languages figure predominantly among them (Chart 3). Over 208,000 immigrants regularly work in Cantonese, Mandarin or an unspecified Chinese language.[10] Punjabi, Tagalog, Korean and Vietnamese are also often used on the job. It is, moreover, those who use these Asian languages who are most likely to use "only" a non-official language at work. Immigrants from Asia tend to have arrived more recently than Europeans. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, Polish and Russian are also often used at work but more often along with English or French.

Official language ability affects the language of work

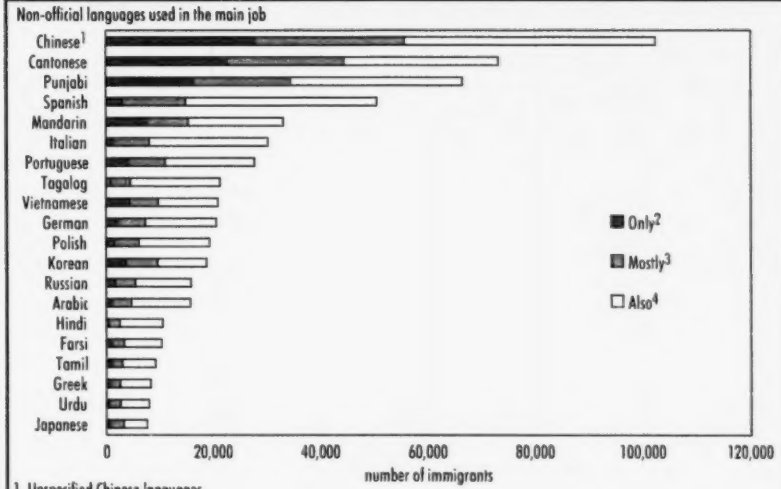
With the shift to a knowledge-based economy, official language skills are even more important in the labour market than in the past.[11] Compared with other immigrants, immigrants

Chart 2 Extent to which immigrants who used languages other than English or French at work utilized them


17% Only uses a non-official language
26% Mostly uses a non-official language
57% Also[1] regularly uses a non-official language

1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Chart 3 Top 20 non-official languages used at work by immigrants: 2006 Census



1. Unspecified Chinese languages.
2. **Only** uses this language at work.
3. **Mostly** uses this language at work.
4. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses this non-official language at work.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

unable to speak at least one of the official languages more often work in some other language (80% in 2006). Almost 60% of those who used "only" a non-official language at work indicated that they were unable to conduct a conversation in English or French. This suggests that some immigrants who work in non-official languages may do so because they face barriers owing to limited official language skills. Their lack of official language skills could restrict to a certain extent their mobility, bargaining position and terms of employment.

It should be noted that non-participation and unemployment rates are higher for immigrants who do not speak English or French. Many will not have worked in 2005 or 2006. As a consequence, they were not asked about their language at work and are not included in this analysis.

About 6% of those who "mostly" or "also" used a non-official language at work indicated they were unable to speak an official language.[12] This implies that they used an official language only in a limited, work-related context.

There is undoubtedly some variation in official language skills beyond the self-reported ability to conduct a conversation. Fluency, literacy and accent all have an influence on employment.[13] The language of work may well capture more of this variation in ability. It might reflect the assessment of employers and the markets as to the actual oral and written language skills of immigrants.

Immigrants who arrive when older more often rely on a non-official language

There are few differences with respect to gender, but in general, older immigrants are more likely to use a language other than English or French at work (Chart 4). The proportion that uses non-official languages increases with age, but not in a constant fashion.

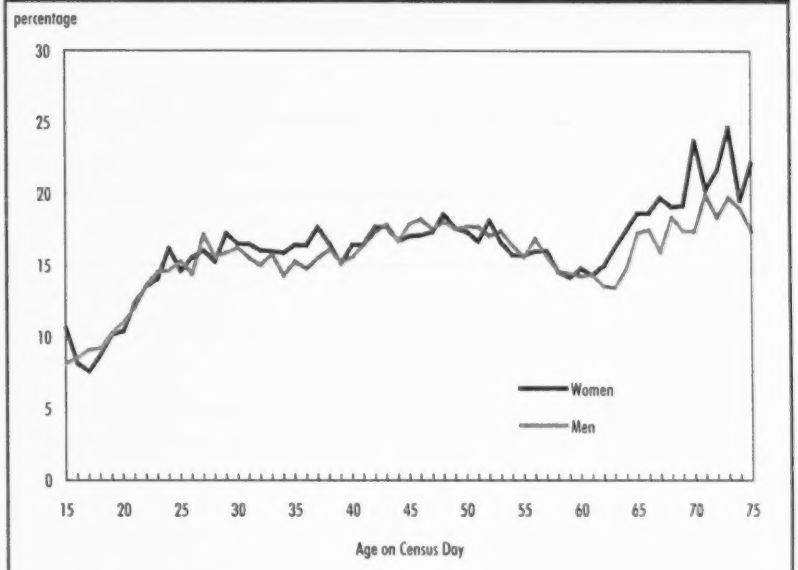
Non-official language use at work was relatively low among youth who held jobs. It was higher but essentially stable over the working ages 25 to 54. It decreased for those 55 to 65. Immigrants over 65 who worked, however, were significantly more likely to use non-official languages in their jobs. The average age of immigrant workers in Canada was about 43 in 2006. For those who used a non-official language with any regularity, it was 44 years of age. For those who used only a non-official language it was higher at 47.

The age effect can be attributed largely to immigrants who arrive when older as opposed to immigrants who have aged in Canada. Immigrants who arrive at more advanced ages are more likely to work in a minority language and are particularly likely to use one to the exclusion of the official languages (Chart 5). Immigrants who used only a non-official language at work arrived in Canada at an average of 36 years of age. Those who did not regularly use one arrived at an average age of 23.

One possible explanation for the association between age at immigration and the use of a non-official language at work may lie in Canada's evolving immigration policy and the various criteria for admission to this country. An increasing portion of the immigrants accepted in Canada each year is screened on labour market criteria.[14]

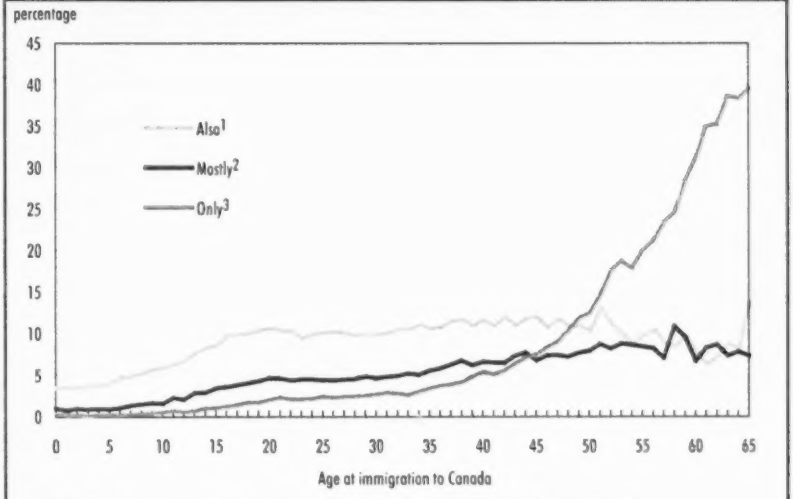
The selection criteria include age along with official language ability, work experience and education. Preference is given to those of prime working age. Many persons, however, continue to be admitted to Canada for family and refugee protection reasons. Older immigrants are more often accepted for these reasons, are not subject to official language or other labour market tests, and are thus more likely to lack official language skills. To the extent that they work to earn a living or to build up pension credits, older immigrants are thus more likely to take jobs not requiring English or French.

CST Chart 4 Proportion of immigrant workers who used a language other than English or French at work by age and sex



Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

CST Chart 5 The proportion of immigrants who worked in a language other than English or French is higher among those who arrived when older



1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Use of languages other than English or French at work declines with time in Canada

Immigrants' use of non-official languages at work appears to lessen as they are in Canada longer (Chart 6). The drop is fastest among those who use non-official languages "only"—the proportion seems to fall by over one-quarter in 2 years.

A slower decrease is observed among those who "mostly" use non-official languages. The proportion of immigrants that "also" uses a non-official language along with English or French seems to remain stable for a considerable time before also falling off. This group may be replenished by movement out of the groups who use "mostly" or "only" a non-official language. Immigrants may make more use of official languages at work as their facility with them improves.

The official languages skills of immigrants improve with time in Canada but the proportion of immigrants who arrive with official language abilities also differs over time. In recent years a larger proportion of immigrants have been selected on labour market criteria that include knowledge of an official language. The broad pattern has been one of improved skills in English and French among newcomers who enter each year.[15]

It seems that almost one-quarter of working immigrants initially use languages other than English or French in their jobs. This proportion appears to fall off as they adjust to Canadian labour markets. However, as many as 1 in 10 still regularly use non-official languages at work after as much as 40 years in Canada. Almost all of them, however, also use one of the official languages regularly in their job.

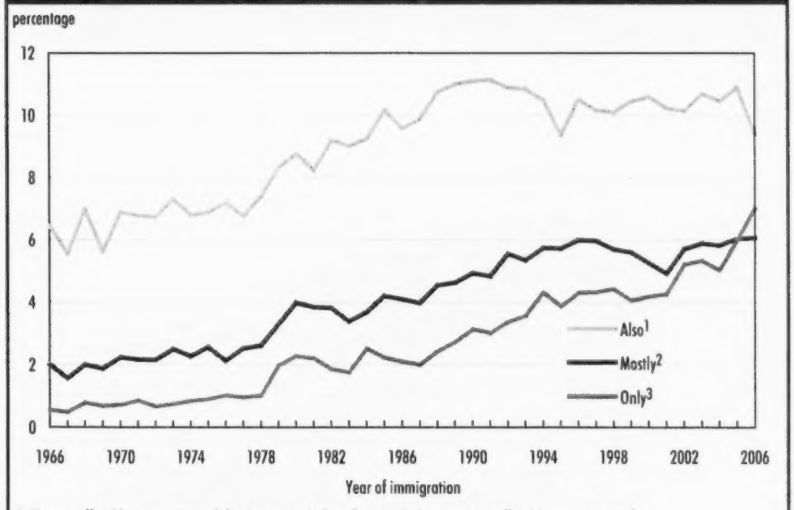
Immigrants with less formal schooling more often work in a language other than English or French

In general, immigrants who use a non-official language at work (in the "also," "mostly," and "only" categories) tend to have less formal education than those who do not (Chart 7). Almost half of these immigrants who use non-official languages at work had a high school diploma or less, compared to about one-third who use only official languages. Over 1 in 5 had no certificate, diploma or degree. This was the case for only about 1 in 10 of those who worked in English and/or French and did not regularly use any other language. Three-quarters of those who used "only" a non-official language had a high school education or less.

About 28% of immigrant workers with no certificate, diploma or degree used a language other than English or French at work. The proportion was about 17% for those with only a high school education. It was lower still among the holders of trade and college certificates.

Beyond that level of education, however, the story is more complex. There were a number of immigrant workers educated at the university level who regularly worked in a language other than English or French. There are also a number of immigrants who hold medical doctorates who regularly use a non-official language at work. However, few of these highly-educated workers use a non-official language to the exclusion of official languages. Perhaps some are professionals who are sought out by their communities owing to their skills in a non-official language.

Chart 6 Proportion of immigrants who worked in a language other than English or French by year of immigration to Canada



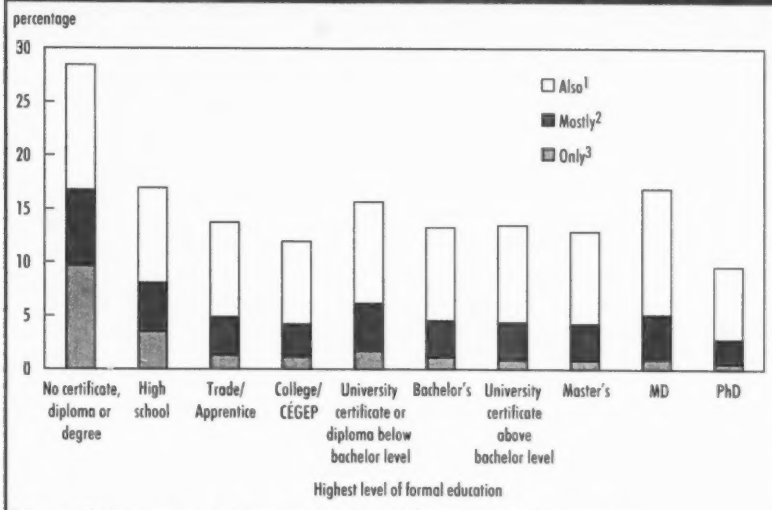
1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Non-official languages used at work in big provinces and cities

The immigrant population in general is concentrated in Canada's largest provinces and cities. Newcomers who work in non-official languages are even more densely concentrated.[16] In 2006, Ontario had nearly 315,000 immigrant workers who used non-official languages in their job; British Columbia had almost 164,000; Quebec had 66,000; and Alberta had 45,000. Among the provinces, British Columbia had the highest proportion (almost 25%) of immigrant workers

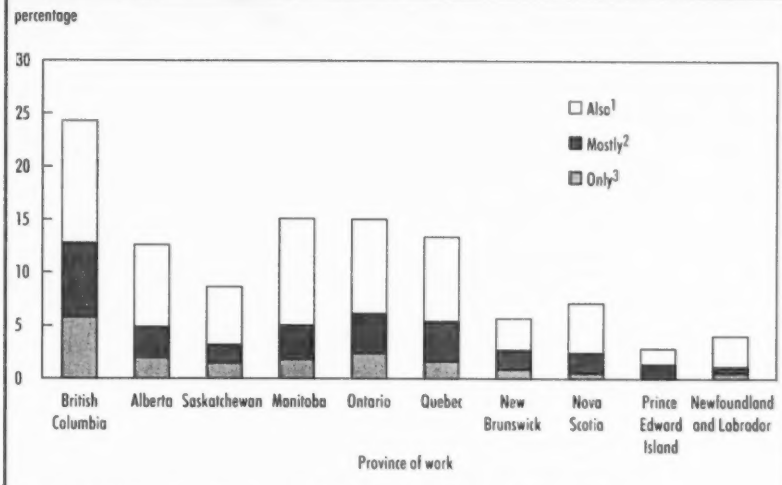
Chart 7 Proportion of immigrant workers at various levels of education who used a language other than English or French in their job



1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Chart 8 Proportion of immigrant workers who used a language other than English or French in their job by province of work



1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

who regularly used other languages at work. Ontario and Manitoba both had about 15%, Quebec had over 13% and Alberta had 12%. In general, non-official languages were used less often in Atlantic Canada (Chart 8).

On the whole, non-official languages are more likely to be used at work in larger urban areas (Chart 9). About 10% of immigrants in rural areas use a language other than English or French at work, while 16.4% of those in urban areas do. Over 95% of immigrants who used a non-official language in their job worked in an urban area. Three major cites: Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal accounted for over 75% of them.

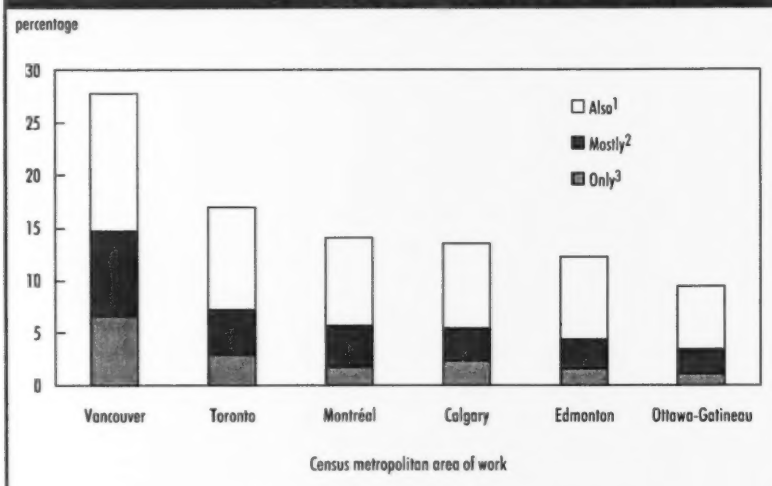
Immigrants more likely to use non-official languages within their language communities

Immigrants who have a non-official mother tongue[17] are far more likely to use a non-official language at work. Holding other factors constant, the likelihood that a given immigrant will use their non-official mother tongue at work increases with the proportion of people who speak that language in the municipality where they are employed.

Language groups differ in how sensitive they are to the presence of people who speak their mother tongue in the area where they work.[18] The top language groups (Chart 3) were tested and a significant positive relationship was found in most cases. For example, among immigrants who have a Chinese mother tongue,[19] the probability of working in that language doubles as the proportion of Chinese speakers in the municipality where they work increases to 10% (Chart 10).[20]

Using a non-official language at work depends in part on the presence of enough customers, employers and co-workers who speak the same language. It helps if there is a market where information is exchanged in that language.

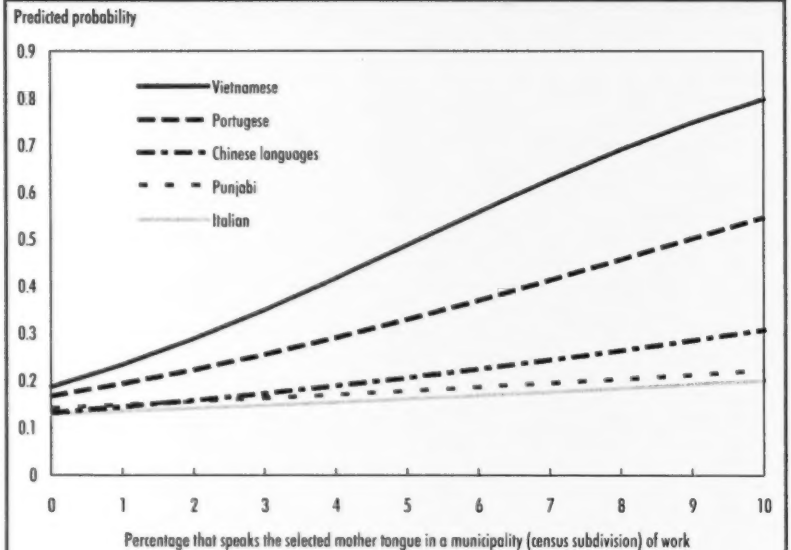
Chart 9 Proportion of immigrants who used a language other than English or French at work in selected metropolitan areas



1. Uses an official language most of the time at work, but **also** regularly uses a non-official language at work.
2. **Mostly** uses a non-official language at work.
3. **Only** uses a non-official language at work.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Chart 10 Probability of using selected mother tongues at work (male immigrants in Canada for 5 years and educated in their source country at the university level)



Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006.

Summary

As immigrants from non-English and non-French speaking countries have made up an increasing proportion of the labour force, the use of other languages in Canada's workplaces has increased.

A significant proportion of immigrant workers regularly use languages other than official languages in their jobs, especially in some provinces and major cities. Those who do so, often but not always lack official language skills. They also more often have a mother tongue other than English or French. Moreover, immigrants who work in other languages tend to have arrived in Canada at a more advanced age and to have lower levels of education than those who do not. Those who come from East Asia are most likely to use a language other than English or French at work. The vast majority work in Canada's major cities.

The probability that a given immigrant will use their mother tongue in their job increases with the proportion of people who speak that language in the community where they work. There could be areas within Canadian cities where there are enough customers and employers who speak specific non-official languages to allow immigrants to earn a living in their native language.

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1. The experienced labour force consists of those workers who held a job on Census Day along with people who had been employed at some point between January 1, 2005 and May 16, 2006.
2. In some of Canada's territories, Aboriginal languages have official status. This paper focuses on immigrants and very few immigrants use Aboriginal languages.
3. Wilson, K. and Portes, A. (1980). Immigrant enclaves: An analysis of the labour market experiences of Cubans in Miami. *American Journal of Sociology, 86*, 295-319.

CST What you should know about this study

This article is based primarily on data collected using the 2B form (long form) in the 2006 Census of Canada. It also makes use of some of the same information collected in the 2001 Census. One out of every five households in Canada receives the longer 2B form.

For each person aged 15 or over who is working or who has worked for pay or in self-employment over the current or immediately preceding calendar year, the census long form poses two questions. The questions are asked with reference to their current job, the job at which they worked the most hours (if they had more than one) or the job of longest duration if they are not working on Census Day. They are: (a) In this job, what language did this person use most often? and (b) Did this person use any other languages on a regular basis in this job? Respondents were able to check-off English or French or to specify another language.

Only immigrants are included in the analysis. All persons who answer the "language at work" question in the census have, by definition, been employed at some point in the recent past. Approximately 50,000 immigrants who lived in Canada in 2006 worked outside Canada. In 2001 about 46,000 did so. These immigrants reported in the census about jobs they held in another country. Some of them may have described a job they held before migrating, but in 2006 over three-fifths of them were providing information about a job they held on Census Day. These foreign job holders span many occupations and countries of origin. Engineers and computer consultants figure prominently among them, as do truck drivers and pilots. Many were born in China, the U.S., India or the UK. About half at each census said they worked in a non-official language. Because they work in a non-Canadian environment, these immigrants have been excluded from the analysis in this article.

Most of the reported numbers and proportions are from simple cross-tabulations. But, to check for spurious associations, a model is used to estimate the probability that an immigrant will regularly use a language other than English or French at work. This allows other factors to be held constant (including: gender, marital status, education level, location of study, official language ability, mother tongue, place of birth, time in Canada, age at immigration, and population in the census subdivision where they work). Similar models are used to estimate the probability that immigrants from a number of mother tongue groups will use a non-official language at work, conditional on the same set of characteristics along with the proportion of persons in their municipality (CSD) who speak the same language. Since language at work is measured at the categorical level, logistic regression was used.

The results of these models are reported as predicted probabilities. These probabilities are calculated for the characteristic under discussion, where that characteristic varies but all other variables are held constant at their average or most common value.

All the relationships discussed in the paper are significant at the .05 level and the tests of significance rely on weights which have been normalized to have a mean of one.

Sanders, J. M. and Nee, V. (1987). Limits of ethnic solidarity in the enclave economy. *American Sociological Review, 52*(6), 745-767.

Portes, A. and Jensen, L. (1987). What's an ethnic enclave? The case for conceptual clarity. *American Sociological Review, 52*(6), 768-773.

4. Since the seminal article by Wilson and Portes in 1980, which described the experiences of Cubans in Miami, such communities or segmented markets have been referred to in the academic literature as enclaves.

5. Sanders, J. M. and Nee, V. (1987). Limits of ethnic solidarity in the enclave economy. *American Sociological Review, 52*(6), 745-767.

   Hou, F. and Picot, G. (2002). Visible-minority neighbourhood enclaves and labour market outcomes of immigrants. In C. M. Beach, A.G. Green, and J. G. Reitz (Eds.), *Canadian Immigration Policy for the 21st Century* (pp. 537-569). Kingston: John Deutsh Institute, McGill-Queen's University Press.

6. Chiswick, B. R. and Miller, P. (2002). Immigrants' earnings: language skills, linguistic concentration and the business cycle. *Journal of Population Economics, 15*, 31-57.

7. Portes and Jensen. (1987).

8. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2007). *Facts and Figures 2006, Immigration Overview: Permanent and Temporary Residents*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

9. Statistics Canada. (2008). *Using Languages at Work in Canada, 2006 Census*. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 97-555. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.

10. Some census respondents distinguish between Cantonese and Mandarin while others who may use these languages simply report "Chinese." Written Chinese, moreover, is not divided in the same way as is spoken Chinese.

11. Keung, N. (2008, November 1). 'English or bust' is new reality for immigrants; Knowledge economy drives language needs. *Toronto Star*, p. A13.

12. This would seem to imply that some immigrants who use non-official languages also use an official language without, in their own estimation, really being able to speak one. However, the census question on official language ability asks about the ability to "conduct a conversation" while the question on "language of work" asks only about the language "used." One might infer that immigrants who **cannot conduct a conversation** in an official language **use** one only in a limited work related context.

13. Chiswick, B. R. (1991). Speaking, reading, and earnings among low-skilled immigrants. *Journal of Labour Economics*, 9(2), 149-170.

14. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2007).

15. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2007).

16. The locations are the census subdivisions (CSD's) or municipalities where immigrants work. Many workers indicated in the Census that they had no fixed place of work (e.g. truck drivers, construction tradespersons, house cleaners, traveling sales persons, etc.). In those cases the CSD of work has been imputed from the CSD of residence.

17. According to the 2006 Census Dictionary: Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the census.

18. Reitz, J. (1990). Ethnic concentrations in labour markets and their implications for ethnic inequality. In R. Breton, W. W. Isajiw, W. E. Kalbach, J. G. Reitz (Eds.), *Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experiences in a Canadian City* (pp. 135-195). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

19. Refers to any Chinese language.

20. The predicted probabilities are for male immigrants who arrived at 24 years of age, have been in Canada for 5 years, are married, speak an official language, and whose highest level of education attained is a university degree from their world area of origin.